

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 30, 2006

Contact:

*Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,  
(202) 523-3240, ext. 114*

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, is concerned about actions taken by authorities in Kazakhstan that fail to live up to international standards of religious freedom. "Recent steps against the Hare Krishnas and members of other religious communities indicate that the government of Kazakhstan, regrettably, is moving in the wrong direction with regard to respecting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief," said Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the Commission.

"In view of Kazakhstan's deteriorating record of respect for human rights and religious freedom, the Commission calls on the U.S. government to oppose the current bid by Kazakhstan to become the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) chair in 2009, and to protest the various actions undertaken by the government of Kazakhstan which fall short of its international obligations to respect freedom of religion or belief," Commission Chair Gaer continued. "Such a bid should only be considered at next week's OSCE Ministerial in Brussels if Kazakhstan takes immediate verifiable steps to implement its OSCE human rights pledges, including on freedom of religion or belief."

On November 21, 2006, Kazakh riot police reportedly demolished 13 of the 66 homes owned and occupied by members of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in their agricultural community outside the city of Almaty. A spokesman for the Hare Krishna community expressed concern that their temple may also be slated for destruction. Although Kazakh officials claim that the dispute is purely economic in nature, only homes owned by Hare Krishna members were destroyed.

During the raid, two buses of riot police closed off all access to the site. Police also launched a news blockade about the action; a camera was confiscated and officials from the OSCE Center in Almaty were prevented from reaching the farm.

This was not the first time Kazakh authorities have tried to confiscate this religious community's land. In April 2006, Kazakh authorities had tried to bulldoze the homes belonging to the Hare Krishnas, but retreated in the presence of journalists.

This time, the houses were demolished, although the Hare Krishna community had been told that no action would be taken before the report of a state Commission set up to resolve the dispute was made public.

The demolition of the Hare Krishna-owned houses occurred on the same day that President Nursultan Nazarbayev was in London for a meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair seeking his support for Kazakhstan's bid to be the OSCE chairman-in-office in 2009. In London, members of Britain's Hindu community protested the demolition of the Hare Krishna property in Kazakhstan.

This action against the Hare Krishna community is the latest in a series of developments over the past two years that signal a retreat from Kazakhstan's previously positive record of respect for the right to religious freedom. These developments include:

-- In July 2005, President Nazarbayev amended the "national security" law requiring all religious groups to register with the government. Activity by unregistered religious organizations is banned. Although most groups do not report difficulties in obtaining registration, the pre-2005 Kazakhstan Law on Religious Associations did not require a religious community to register with the state. Only 10 signatures were needed to register a religious association.

-- In February 2005, President Nazarbayev signed new legislation on extremist activity which granted increased oversight authority to a state agency. According to the OSCE, these anti-extremism measures lack a clear definition of "extremism" and could be

arbitrarily applied to religious and other groups.

-- Beginning in late 2004, Kazakh authorities took measures to increase control over mosques and imams in south Kazakhstan who want to remain independent of the state.

-- Baptists, Pentecostals and other Protestant Christians have been subjected to heavy fines for unregistered religious activity in the past year. State institutions, including schools, actively discourage children from attending religious services, particularly in the case of Protestants.

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer